

Learning to write: Writing to learn¹

Academic Writing: A Literature Review

Academic writing plays a major role in the field of higher education and is the primary form of communication within individual subject disciplines. In recent years however, concerns have arisen regarding student ability in this area. Many researchers and academics are now investigating the current and future role of academic writing within 21st Century educational institutions. This paper will therefore discuss the current theories implemented by practitioners and the practical ways in which such debates can be developed.

The problem of academic writing

Academic writing is used to express acquired knowledge in a specific subject area. Such writing tends to be serious in nature and often demonstrates particular theories or arguments in relation to a specified discourse. Academic writing is mainly undertaken for learning development or course assessment purposes and the same principles apply to publication of academic papers.

The changing nature of higher education is creating a major issue in the support and development of academic writing. From 1987 to 1992 student participation in higher education doubled, changing from an elitist system into a mass one (although critics, Layer 2006, argue that the failure of funding agencies to match the growth of resources means that it is simply crowded). In addition to this growth, the present government plans to increase the number of students in higher education substantially over the next decade effectively,

'...expanding towards 50% participation' (Great Britain 2003. p.22).

This increase in student numbers has brought with it a proliferation in student diversity, with higher education institutions encountering students with varying academic abilities and cultural backgrounds. Practically, the increase in student numbers has also created resource issues in many institutions with both academic staff and learning facilities being considerably stretched. The Dearing report in 1997 highlighted the need for 'a radical change in attitudes to teaching' (p.15) in order to cope with the new challenges facing the higher education sector.

¹ Britton, J 1970

The magnitude of the issues raised above demonstrates a need for swift and significant change in higher education writing provision and highlights the requirement for a shift in both teaching pedagogy and practical method (Haggis, 2006). Academic writing is increasingly becoming a prominent issue which needs to be addressed.

Internationally, academic writing and its theories are evident in Australia, South Africa, and Northern Europe; however it is the United States that has developed most substantially in the field. American institutions have been providing their students with writing support since the late 19th century. In response, theories and developments in academic writing have been discussed and published in the USA since the 1960's (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Consequently Britain also needs to implement a range of approaches to academic writing to reflect the increased size and diversity of the student population.

The importance of academic writing

Academic writing plays a major role in higher education, both in student understanding of course content and the consequent assessment of student knowledge. Recent studies have highlighted that academic staff are aware of the importance of writing, with one survey highlighting that almost 90% of staff felt that it was necessary to teach writing skills to university students (Ganobscik-Williams, 2004. p.28). Maintaining standards of academic writing has significant implications for both those teaching, and learning in higher education.

The ability to express themselves effectively is an intrinsic transferable skill for students, which can be mastered and developed throughout their university education. In order for students to learn and contribute to their subject field, an understanding of the language used and the ability to communicate in such dialogue is essential. From a practitioners viewpoint, marking becomes far less laborious when the work is well written and displays arguments clearly and concisely. It consequently falls to the role of teaching staff to initiate students into their discipline and to support them during their academic progress. The development of effective academic writing support clearly offers reciprocal benefit to both students and staff. Nevertheless, the ways in which it is integrated into subject disciplines creates a challenge for the higher education sector.

Key Theories and Methodologies

Key thinkers involved in the field of academic writing come from a range of disciplines and many have taught and are still teaching in a higher education environment. As academics themselves, writers in this field have documented their attempts to negotiate a path between the limited resources of the education sector and the escalating demands placed upon them.

Most of the current research undertaken tends to focus primarily on small scale projects that examine individual experiences as opposed to a whole institution approach to academic writing. Consequently, the findings of such small scale research cannot be easily applied on a national scale.

In the UK there is a broad consensus about the three main approaches to academic writing in higher education; the skills model, the socialisation model and finally the academic literacies approach.

Skills Model

The skills model (often referred to as the deficit model), involves the teaching of study skills, (including writing) through individual one to one support sessions or group workshops. Such classes are usually based in the student support centre and are conducted by non-academic staff. Sessions focus on generic based support outside of the subject discipline and tend to focus on individual projects or assignments with which students may be struggling. Due to the nature of such support it is often viewed as a service provided for students experiencing academic difficulties and therefore has a relative level of stigma attached. In previous years the thinking behind student writing and study support has identified academic writing as a student centred problem (Lea and Street, 1998). Consequently the skills model offers practical solutions in line with this notion. This model identifies the responsibility for the "problem" of academic writing as lying primarily with the student. This approach identifies the issue as a personal failing and offers minimal support to students who may be struggling. Whilst, some study support centres are attempting to provide a service that is, 'non stigmatised and which has a non-deficit model' (Orr and Blythman, 1999. p.203), it remains to be seen just how the role of student study support will develop with regard to generic academic writing skills.

The skills model also has the advantage of being 'power neutral' and anonymous and for some students this may make the service a

less intimidating activity. The skills model, although imperfect, does have an important role to play with regard to students who may be struggling with generic writing skills and therefore is maintained by most institutions as a vital area of support.

Socialisation Model

The socialisation model, (also referred to as the institutional default model), implies that students will acquire academic writing skills through 'implicit induction' (Ganobcsik- Williams, 1996. p.32). The model holistically examines students' daily engagement with the subject discourse alongside the role of the institutional habitus.

This approach assumes that students will develop knowledge and skills in their chosen discourse simply by being immersed in the culture of higher education. As such the socialisation model is more attuned to issues of context and culture than that of the skills model, and challenges the presumption that academic writing is solely an individual issue. Whilst this approach highlights the student need to identify and interpret the language of the discourse, it also recognises the university and its teaching staff as being integral in the transference of academic writing skills and knowledge.

The socialisation model allows for an appreciation of the concept of acculturation and finds its roots in constructivist education methods. By identifying that, 'Learning is a social activity' (Hein, 1991. p.2) it becomes clear that socialisation into the higher education culture plays an important role in student development. Whilst an emergence in the culture of higher education may play an important part we cannot suppose that simple socialisation may remedy academic writing issues. Ultimately the socialisation model treats the university,

'As a homogenous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution.' (Lea and Street as cited in Lea and Stierer, 2000. p.35)

Discussions of linguistics and academic literacies (Spack and Zamel, 1998) however, demonstrate to us the complexities of language, highlighting that it cannot be assumed that students will simply soak up the language of a complex discourse that may have taken their lecturer themselves many years to understand.

Together the two approaches have provided the theoretical basis for practical academic writing provision throughout higher education institutions in the UK. However the limitations of these two

approaches has led researchers to propose that a more holistic approach to academic writing is required. Consequently in the last decade the prominence of the academic literacies approach has developed into the primary school of thought, with much of proposed future action being based around its propositions.

Academic Literacies Model

Academic literacies is a prominent theoretical influence upon practitioners researching academic writing. The approach challenges the notion that writing is solely a technical skill or an individual action but instead,

'...identifies writing as a social and disciplinary practice' (Lillis 1999. p .26)

The academic literacies model therefore examines the institutional culture in which writing takes place and the way in which this may encourage or hinder writing development. The theory takes a holistic approach to writing and examines the ways in which current models and practices may need to be adapted in order to accommodate the changing culture of higher education. By developing the skills and socialisation models academic literacies has begun to question the very nature and context of academic writing. By examining writing in such a more holistic manner, academic literacies explores the culture and context in which writing takes place and consequently the very nature of higher education itself.

Research in the field of academic writing is primarily based on small scale case studies and ethnographic accounts of writing at university (Ivanic, 1998). Such research provides a much deeper understanding of the personal intricacies and cultural issues raised by students and staff with regard to academic writing provision. One key feature of this approach is that it intrinsically links academic writing and personal identity highlighting how,

'A student's personal identity...may be challenged by the forms of writing required in the different disciplines' (Lea and Street, 2000. p.35)

Recent research has also examined issues of identity and writing with regard to class, race (Lillis, 1999. p.24) and gender (Francis, B. 2001), highlighting the effects of increasing diversity within the field of higher education. Lillis (1999) found that some students were actually fully aware of the correct styles and technicalities of writing academically. Despite this, they felt that by writing in such a

manner the piece of work did not feel reflective of their personal style. These findings challenge the skills and socialisation approaches, instead providing sound evidence for a more holistic model, examining the culture and context in which writing takes place. Whilst the academic literacies approach influences the majority of writing support established in America, the majority of UK higher education institutions do not practice the academic literacies approach, but are instead trapped in an ineffective system based primarily on the skills and socialisation models. It is important to note however that none of these methods alone is sufficient to tackle the issues highlighted above and institutions need to be aware that the models,

'...are not mutually exclusive and do not follow a simple linear pattern' (Ganobscik-Williams, 2004. p.36).

It is instead considered that the three models interlink and that each plays an important role in the various facets of academic writing. Individual institutions consequently need to be aware of each of these approaches and able to utilise them as and when appropriate.

The practical application of academic writing theory

Academic literacies theory challenges current practices with regard to writing support and has promoted a subject based approach to teaching writing skills. Consequently through the merging of skills, socialisation and academic literacies approaches, a range of practical methods have been established. This unification of approaches can be seen in a number of initiatives from compulsory writing courses for students in their first year through to institutional writing centres. Despite clear findings from the field of academic literacies and practical approaches taken in America, the majority of measures taken in the UK have simply involved integrating generic writing assistance into student support programmes. Nevertheless, practical academic writing support can be effective in a number of ways from generic writing courses to the implementation of subject specific writing within lectures. Academic literacies theory suggests that institutions need to develop a greater awareness of the issue and therefore staff development and training would prove beneficial. All of these methods can be implemented in a variety of ways and are informed by the range of theoretical approaches discussed above. One outcome of the current interest is the creation of two CETL's Learnhigher² and Write Now³ who are

² <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/>

³ <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/depts/dops/writing-centre/write-now-cetl.cfm>

currently investigating and developing collaborative resources for sector use.

In summary, academic writing is a substantial issue that needs attention and support from the academic community. By amalgamating both the skills, socialisation and academic literacies approach, institutions have the opportunity to develop effective frameworks to assist students in their academic development. Embedded in even the most abstract of writing theories is the possibility for practical initiatives to improve student writing. It is therefore necessary for various practical writing methods to be implemented and evaluated at both an institution wide and individual programme level in order to develop a range of resources. Without such support problems may arise not only for retention but also for student engagement and overall course satisfaction.

Although this paper suggests a few practical ways of introducing and developing subject specific academic writing such processes need to be developed and adapted to fit programmes and individual academic styles. Whilst issues of resources and time will always be present, the research outlined in this paper allows academic staff the opportunity to develop their own practice and consequently improve the learning experience for their students.

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